THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Remember

April 18, 1999
John M. Buchanan

Part of us wants to say, let's forget about it. It's all over. . . we thought about a better world, imagined a new community of love, dreamt about a time when all people would live together in peace. But the truth has caught up with us. . . the bitter truth that our youthful hope has been crucified.

And still—the other stories remain. Stories about a few people who saw it differently, stories about gestures of forgiveness and healing, stories about goodness, beauty and truth. And as we listen to the deeper voices in our heart we realize that beneath our skepticism and cynicism there is a yearning for love, unity and communion that doesn't go away even when there are so many arguments to dismiss it as sentimental childhood memories.

Henri J. M. Nouwen
With Burning Hearts

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Acts 2:14, 36-41
Luke 24:13-35

"Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road. . .?"
(Luke24:32)

Dear God, sometimes we forget that because of what happened at Easter, everything is fresh and new, and that our lives are full of possibility and potential. Sometimes we live as though nothing is possible: that our fate is to live day after day in routine. So, dear God, do startle us with your presence in our lives, and open us to the good news of your love in Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is a ritual in which I regularly engage which I enjoy, but which always mystifies me a little bit when I reflect on it. When I have an enjoyable experience, see a baseball game, hear a concert, watch a movie, I like to read about it later. Many of you will know that one of the high and holy days in this city, on at least the North Side of it, happened last Monday afternoon when the Cubs returned to Wrigley Field. Some of you will not be surprised to know that even though I had an important meeting at 3:00, I was there for 4 1/2 innings. It is for some of us an important occasion, a pivotal event in the rhythm of time moving from year to year. Opening Day, along with Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, is a way to keep and know time, to discern time's significance by its rhythmic content. The content last Monday afternoon wasn't so hot. But I enjoyed the day, and, as always, one of the best parts of the experience was to read about it in the paper the next morning.

I know that I am not alone in this peculiar ritual. It's fun, somehow, to read a baseball box score of a game you saw: the batting order, the hits, runs, errors—it's all there in fine print, just like you saw it. Somehow the experience of seeing the game is sealed, authenticated, pinned down, by the historic memory of the game represented by a box score. It's true as well about a concert you attend, or a movie. The morning after review may surprise you, as it often does me, by telling you that what you thought was a glorious performance by the Chicago Symphony or Mick Jagger was actually seriously flawed. But nevertheless, to recall it is to experience it again and perhaps more deeply.

Memory seals and oftentimes clarifies experience and frequently allows us to see significance in experiences that we didn't get at the time. I suspect that a lot of what is in the Bible became more clear in the remembering and retelling and writing than it was at the moment. I'm pretty sure that the people who experienced the crucifixion of Jesus first-hand did not experience it as a gesture of God's love. I suspect that Moses' experience with the burning bush and the plagues and the escape through the sea all became clearer to him later as he remembered them.

Professor Fred Craddock says there are three ways to know an event: anticipating the event, experiencing the event and remembering the event. In anticipation we are hindered by not knowing what exactly is going to happen. You can eagerly anticipate the game, concert or movie but who knows how great or awful it will be. At the moment, Craddock says, we are hindered by the clutter and confusion of so much happening so fast. But in remembering—recognition, realization and understanding happen. (*Interpretation, Luke,* p.287)

It's why we hurry to the photography shop with our film as soon as we return from the trip, and then hurry back to get our pictures and eagerly open them, right there on the counter, to see what just happened to us a few days earlier, to begin the process of sealing and clarifying the experience by remembering it.

On the first day of the week after the death, by crucifixion, of Jesus of Nazareth, two of his followers began the process of sealing the experience they had with him by remembering. They had decided to go for a walk. They had been hiding in Jerusalem following the devastating events of the week before: the deepening crisis and conflict, his being drawn into the conspiracy by his enemies, his arrest and trial and humiliation and death. It was for them a crushing experience, an experience of profound personal loss. They had come to love the man, this strong, good, exciting, compelling and vulnerable human being who seemed to so love the world, and them, that everything was fresh and new. And now, at 33, he was dead. In addition to the larger crisis which his crucifixion represented, there was the matter of their personal pain, their grief.

So two of them went for a walk. They're remembering. They're doing exactly what you need to do in grief. You need to talk. After the funeral the family needs to gather and remember and talk about the deceased and tell stories and share vignettes and laugh and cry together. The slow but sure process of healing actually starts around the kitchen table after the funeral when family and friends gather and say "Remember how she used to . . . remember the time when . . ."

So that is what these two are doing, Cleopas and an unnamed companion walking toward Emmaus. There is a bit of mystery here. Why is the companion unnamed and who exactly was Cleopas? Furthermore, the location of Emmaus has never been determined. The name is familiar: there is the inevitable tourist site in Israel today where thousands of pilgrims recreate the walk but the people who know assure us that the location of Emmaus remains a mystery.

So maybe Emmaus is where you go when you can't stay in Jerusalem any longer. Maybe Emmaus is wherever you go when you need to walk and think and grieve and remember. And maybe the two people on the road are anyone who ever lost a dear one, a beloved, a dream, a hope, a plan. . . anyone who ever had to live with unrealized expectation, with gnawing, relentless grief. "Sometimes it seems that life is just one long series of losses," Henri Nouwen wrote. "When we were born we lost the safety of the womb, when we went to school we lost the security of family life, when we got our first job, we lost the freedom of our youth. . . when we grew old we lost our good looks, when we became weak or ill we lost our physical independence, and when we die we will lose it all. The losses that settle themselves deeply in our hearts and minds are the loss of intimacy . . the loss of innocence, the loss of love. . .the loss of our dreams. . . ."(*With Burning Hearts,* p.25-26)

see F. Buechner

Maybe Emmaus is where you go when your sense of loss weighs you down and while you walk to Emmaus you remember your way through your losses, walking and talking about what you had and no longer have: what you hoped for but cannot seem to realize: who you were and who you now are and who you now can and must become.

And it is in the middle of this vulnerable and human experience that the two on the road are joined by a third person. More mystery. It is Jesus. They are friends and disciples but they don't recognize him. Is it, as some have suggested, that they are walking west into the setting sun and they can't see? Or is it not, as Fred Craddock suggests, that in the midst of the clutter and confusion of the present we often miss the importance of what is happening, thus necessitating the experience of remembering?

In any event, he joins the conversation, asks them what they were discussing. They tell him the events of the last few days: Jesus, our hopes that he was the one, his death, the rumor that he was alive, the clutter and confusion of the present.

And then he, unknown companion, leads them through their own scripture and religious tradition, helps them put what just happened in the context of that larger framework, that is to say, helps them remember.

They invite the stranger to stay. At table he takes bread and blesses it and breaks it and they remember: "their eyes open and they recognized him." And then the experience ends. The stranger disappears "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?"

And instead of staying the night in Emmaus, where they have gone to deal with their grief, that very hour they return to Jerusalem to tell the story, "how he had been made known to them in the breaking of bread." An experience with the risen Lord, a rather common experience of the presence of Jesus Christ, became a source of rebirth for them. Tears became laughter, grief became new energy, new creativity, new commitment, new faith.

I love the way the Bible continues to assure me that faith is a gift given by God, sometimes given by God through other people: a Sunday School teacher, mentor, pastor, confirmation class teacher. Faith is not something you can force or coerce on others, or on yourself, for that matter. You cannot will yourself to have faith, no matter how hard you try, any more than you can will yourself to love. Faith, like love, is a gift. It was one of the more profound theological understandings of the Reformation, namely that our ability to believe in God is a gift of God.

I love the way the Bible assures me that the gift of faith is given in experiences that are fairly ordinary. The Easter event, after all, is not planned and executed with much marketing sense or flair or drama. Why didn't the risen Christ appear to Pilate and Caephas, the chief priest, someone asked. It certainly would have cleared up a lot of misunderstanding. Why not the Temple? That would have been perfect. Why all the ambiguity and uncertainty? Why not some proof for people who mattered, movers and shakers? Why these two anonymous characters? Maybe its because God wants us to know that revelation happens in ordinary ways to ordinary people. Maybe that's the whole point.

The risen Christ comes to those who are trying to follow, trying to love him, trying to be his people, trying to remember. He doesn't come as a proof to powerful but skeptical unbelievers. He comes to his friends, to those who know him, and it is his gift to them.

It is widely held that experiences of deep spiritual significance, experiences of divine revelation, experiences in which we know God, will be always extraordinary experiences, full of drama and mystery. Some of us assume that our spirituality is deficient because we have not had a luminous religious experience. Many of us wait for the voice in the night, the thunder and lightening, the bolt from the blue, the tongues of fire, the moment of crystal clarity, our name spoken by God with precision. At a time of deep spiritual searching, Anne Lamott wrote, "Would it be any skin off God's nose to give me a straight answer, just once?" And I love the way the Bible suggests that it's not always like that, not often like that: that God comes to us in ways that are everyday and ordinary: as common as a late afternoon walk and bread broken and a meal shared.

Frederick Buechner, Presbyterian minister and novelist, has been writing about it all his life. "The sacred moments, the moments of miracle, are often the everyday moments, the moments which, if we do not look with more than our eyes or listen with more than our ears reveal only. . .a gardener, a stranger coming down the road behind us, a meal like any other meal. But if we look with our hearts, if we listen with all our being and imagination. . . what we may see is Jesus himself." (*The Magnificent Defeat,* p.87-88)

We watch and wait and anticipate and expect the divine to break into our lives in experiences of extraordinary clarity and lucidity, and sometimes that is what happens: words of a sermon become more than words, become a means of grace; beautiful music by the choir or the symphony orchestra or the soprano soloist becomes more than music, becomes a way the holiness of beauty and the beauty of holiness penetrates our being, a glorious sunset proclaims the goodness of creation and creator. Thank God for those occasional, extraordinary experiences.

But the Bible is suggesting that Jesus Christ comes to us in ways that are far more modest, in the daily round, in the activities that occupy us, in the people whose faces pass by, in moments of intimacy and passion, in moments of kindness and compassion, in bread broken and meals shared.

He comes particularly, I believe, in moments of high joy and also as we experience loss and as we remember. In her memoir *Traveling Mercies,* Anne Lamott writes about dealing with the death of her father, a process that went on for more than 20 years. She remembers visiting the Rothko Chapel in Houston which she describes as "a small ecumenical sanctuary designed by the great abstract painter, Mark Rothko. . .a deeply sacred space. It is quiet—there are huge Rothko canvases on the walls, purple and wine red. . ." She writes, "I felt like the thing inside was conspiring to get me to stop. . .I've heard that the Holy Spirit very rarely respects one's comfort zones."

In the middle of the experience of sacredness and silence, she began to think about her father. "I saw my dad sitting beside me. He loved silence. He read me Wallace Stevens' great poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" a dozen times over the years." She begins to remember more—the stillness of her father's office, the way he made her feel

great, "It's so different having a living father who loves you, even someone complex and imperfect. After your father dies, defeat becomes pretty defeating. When he's still alive there are setbacks and heartbreaks, but you're still the apple of someone's eye."

And then she begins to experience the loss all over again. "I started to cry, and I cried for a long time. . . Twenty years ago. For twenty years I have ached to go back home, when there was nobody there to whom I could return."

And then, in memory and tears, healing and resurrection begin to happen . . . "The light in the Rothko Chapel was very beautiful and it bathed me. . . The thing about light is that it really isn't yours: it's what you gather and shine back. And it gets more power from reflectiveness: if you sit still and take it in, it fills your cup. And then you can give it off yourself. So I sat still."

And, in the healing of memory, she remembers as a little girl trying to keep up with her father who always walked fast . . . "That's why I naturally walk so fast, and why I sometimes feel I can walk forever." (p.221-228)

That's Anne Lamott's story. You and I have one as well: a story of our losses, our grief, our attempts to live through it, to rise above it, to put life back together. You and I have Emmaus stories of remembering. And the promise is that Jesus Christ comes to us and in him God gives us the gift of faith, the comfort and strength of the resurrection and the power to live with hope and confidence and strength and new life, new energy, new passion, new faith, new being.

In this season of Easter, we continue to be reminded that ordinary moments become sacred moments, that memory clarifies and seals experiences of grace, and that God lives. God lives not in a remote corner of the universe, not on a throne invisible above the clouds, not even in creeds, philosophies, theologies or sermons, but in the world, in the ordinary experiences of your life and mine: in your classroom, your board room, your office, courtroom, jail cell, hospital room, emergency room, your kitchen, your office, your church.

God lives: the risen Christ comes particularly when loss is shattering--in refugee camps in Kosovo, as bread is shared—Christ shared.

Easter is about an empty tomb. And it is about the companion who comes to us on the dusty road to Emmaus, the city streets, comes into our lives to be our guest, our host, our friend, our companion, our Lord.

All praise to him. Amen.